

O/CONGRESSIONAL AFFAIRS

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Key CIA Witness

MR. TOM BROKAW: One of the key players in the Iran arms controversy is CIA Director William Casey. He was operated on 19 days ago. He is reported to be slowly improving but there are complications.

White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan said today there are no plans, however, to replace Casey. However, as NBC's Art Kent reports now, replacements for Casey are being discussed, both as spy agency head and as a witness in the arms scandal.

MR. ART KENT: A medical report issued by Georgetown Hospital this evening said the 73 year old Casey is now receiving radiation therapy following the removal of a malignant tumor from his brain.

Though doctors say Casey is sitting up and eating, the CIA Director is unable to walk by himself and has difficulty talking.

Though Casey will not likely be returning to Capitol Hill to answer questions about the CIA's involvement in the Iran/Contra arms deal for some time, if ever, intelligence experts say his answers are not as important as they once might have been.

The reason, the sources say, is that Casey relied on one key man to handle the Contras and later the Iran

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arms shipments for the CIA. ~~He is Dwayne Claridge, now head of the CIA's anti-terrorist section.~~

Claridge has testified before the Senate Intelligence Committee once and will be questioned again.

Claridge was CIA Station Chief at the Rome Embassy in 1981 when Casey brought him back to run CIA operations in Central America. Government sources say Claridge planned the mining of Nicaragua's harbors in 1983 and they say he wrote the controversial Contra training manual for the CIA. And it was Claridge who arranged for Contra supplies to be moved through El Salvador's Ilopango Airbase.

In all of these, Claridge worked closely with National Security aide Oliver North and it was Claridge who North contacted to arrange for Southern Air Transport to move a shipment of Israeli arms from Portugal to Iran in November of 1985.

In the past, Congressional committee members have described Claridge as an evasive, casual and imprecise witness, but he is likely to be the key CIA witness because of his deep involvement with Oliver North and Casey's inability to testify.

Intelligence sources say the two frontrunners for Casey's job are current CIA Deputy Director Robert Gates and U.N. Ambassador Vernon Walters, a former CIA Deputy Chief. Both choices indicate the White House is looking for an Intelligence professional rather than a politician.

Art Kent, NBC News, Washington.

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